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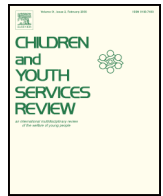
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# Who am I? Who do you think I am? Stability of racial/ethnic self-identification among youth in foster care and concordance with agency categorization

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## ABSTRACT

While it has been well documented that racial and ethnic disparities exist for children of color in child welfare, the accuracy of the race and ethnicity information collected by agencies has not been examined, nor has the concordance of this information with youth self-report. This article addresses a major gap in the literature by examining 1) the racial and ethnic self-identification of youth in foster care, and the rate of agreement with child welfare and school categorizations; 2) the level of concordance between different agencies (school and child welfare); and 3) the stability of racial and ethnic self-identification among youth in foster care over time. Results reveal that almost 1 in 5 youth change their racial identification over a one-year period, high rates of discordance exist between the youth self-report of Native American, Hispanic and multiracial youth and how agencies categorize them, and a greater tendency for the child welfare system to classify a youth as White, as compared to school and youth themselves. Information from the study could be used to guide agencies towards a more youth-centered and flexible approach in regard to identifying, reporting and affirming youth's evolving racial and ethnic identity.

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## 1. Introduction

Increasing awareness, sensitivity and responsiveness to racial and ethnic minority youth and families has been a major issue in child welfare. Overrepresentation of youth of color, most notably African American and American Indian youth (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2014), concerns about institutional bias toward these youth and families (e.g., Hill, 2004), poor outcomes for youth of color exiting

the system (Miller, Farrow, Meltzer & Notkin, 2014) and attention to the need for improved system cultural competence (e.g., Beckett & Lee, 2004), underscore the importance of this issue. Indeed, positive racial identity has been shown to be important for well-being and for buffering the negative effects of racism and discrimination (Chae, Lincoln & Jackson, 2011; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone & Zimmerman, 2003). Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of supporting the positive racial/ethnic identity development of young people in foster care is affirming their racial/ethnic self-identification.

### 1.1. Stability of self-identification over time

Contrary to the static, quantitative descriptions of race/ethnicity for various groups of young people (including youth in foster care), several studies have documented the fluidity of racial/ethnic identity among adolescents and the tendency for self-identification to shift over time. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (the ADD Health survey), which was administered to a nationally representative sample of over 11,000 youth, ages 14–18, and then again five years later, Hiltin, Brown, and Elder (2006) found that 10% of respondents had changed their racial categorization over time.

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<sup>1</sup> The Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care is dedicated to experimentally identifying approaches that improve the outcomes of young people in foster care. Agency members of the Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care who contributed to this paper include the Portland Public Schools and the Oregon Foster Care Program. For information about this manuscript, please contact Jessica Schmidt ([jdsc@pdx.edu](mailto:jdsc@pdx.edu)). Preparation of this manuscript was funded, in part, by grants #R324A100166 from the Institute of Educational Sciences and #R01HD064854 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health.

Interestingly, when the authors investigated how different psychological and social characteristics varied with consistency of racial self-identification, they found that young people who lived in predominantly White neighborhoods, had higher SES backgrounds and experienced greater self-esteem, were less likely to change their classification. Also examining the ADD Health data over time, J.M. and Kao (2007) found that youth originally identifying as multiracial were most likely to change their racial identity from one time point to the next (over 40%). In comparison, single race groups were relatively stable; one important exception however were Native American youth, of whom 33% changed their racial categorization over the five year period.

Change in racial categorization over time is described by some authors (e.g. Hiltin et al., 2006) as typical of normal development, and is thought to become more solidified as young people grow in their awareness and understanding of different racial groups, with most eventually settling on a single, stable racial choice in young adulthood (e.g. see Poston, 1990). However, other researchers contend that for many individuals racial identity never becomes fixed, can change at any point during one's lifetime, and is subject to new experiences around prejudice, significant life events, new relationships and even larger changes within society, such as political movements (e.g. see Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001). While research exists that supports both points of view, the experiences of youth in foster care have been overlooked. Thus, information around the stability or fluidity of racial self-categorization for youth in foster care over time is non-existent.

### 1.2. Concordance between self-report and categorization by others

Research examining the concordance between racial and ethnic self-identification of youth in foster care and the external classifications provided by the agencies they interface with is also non-existent. Researchers investigating the intersection of race/ethnicity and child welfare typically rely on the classifications provided by the child welfare agency, which are based upon required data elements for the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). Regarding race and ethnicity, AFCAR requirements, as noted in Appendices A and B of the federal regulations at 45 CFR 1355 and as stated in the federal child welfare policy manual, specify that a person's race is "based on how a client perceives him/herself or in the case of young children, how the parent identifies the child" (*Adoption and Foster Care Analysis & Reporting System (AFCARS) & Child Welfare Policy Manual*, 2014). Despite this stipulation, how the data is actually collected remains unclear and has not been systematically evaluated. In lieu of this information, it is likely, as Lu et al. (2004, pg. 449) point out, "this method of classification is considered to best reflect the child's race/ethnicity from the perception of the child welfare system although it may not necessarily reflect the child's own racial/ethnic identity nor that of his family".

Likewise, schools have similar federal requirements to collect and report on student race and ethnicity. Districts and states receiving federal funds (e.g. the Elementary and Secondary Education Act or the Individuals with Disabilities Act) must participate in the EDFacts data collection system, which gathers information about student race and ethnicity. The data collection guidelines for EDFacts stem from "Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity" (Anonymous, 1997) issued by the Office of Management and Budget in 1997. The specific federal guidance around ethnic and racial data collection by schools was published by the U.S. Department of Education in the Federal Registrar (Anonymous, 2007) on October 19, 2007 (72 Fed Reg 59267) and, while it emphasizes self-identification (defined as student or parent on behalf of student), an observer (i.e. school staff) can provide the information if the family does not. Similar to the child welfare system, there is not a clear picture of whether race/ethnicity data collected by the school for youth in foster care stems primarily from student self-report, information provided by parent (in this case, bio or

foster) or school staff, nor has the concordance between school categorization and youth self-identification been examined.

In the broader literature however, researchers have examined the concordance of youth self-identification with the categorizations made by others. In J.M. & Kao's, 2007 study, they compared the racial self-perceptions of youth with the interviewer's categorization of the youth's race and ethnicity. They found that among youth who identified as Native American, only 5% had interviewers who agreed with their self-report. In contrast, among students identifying as White, concordance with the interviewer rating was 87%. In addition to Native American youth, rate of agreement was also low for youth identifying as multiracial. For example, among youth identifying as Black–White multiracial, 17% were described by interviewers as only White. Even more striking, 45% of students identifying as Asian–White were categorized by interviewers as White only. Saperstein and Penner (2014) conducted a parallel study with a slightly different sample from the ADD Health survey and found that the level of agreement between interviewer ratings and youth self-report was lowest for Native American youth (77.5%), followed by Asian youth (94.1%), although these figures suggest significantly greater concordance than Doyle and Kao's study. Cambell and Troyer (2007) further explored the significance of discordance between youth self-report and observer ratings on the Add Health survey by examining its impact on mental health. Focusing on the relative large percentage of Native American youth who were perceived to be another race by the interviewers, they examined various indicators of stress and well-being. In comparison to youth who were correctly classified as Native American by observers, Native American youth who were misclassified reported significantly more distress on 4 out of 5 indicators, including a greater likelihood to have thoughts around suicide, attempt suicide and believe they would die at a young age, even when controlling for differences such as SES and social support. The authors suggest that the findings highlight the potential impact perceptions and expectations of others have on an individual's identity when it is incongruent with how the individual sees himself or herself.

If one expands the literature search to include studies comparing the racial self-reports of adults vs. administrative records in health care, the research is robust. Numerous studies have documented a consistent pattern of health care agencies under-classifying certain minority groups and multi-racial individuals. Kressin, Chang, Hendriks, and Kazis (2003) found only a 60% rate of agreement between patients' self-reports of race and ethnicity, and Veteran's Affairs (VA) administrative records, with the lowest levels of concordance for patients identifying as Native American, Asian and Pacific Islander. Similarly, a study by Gomez, Kelsey, Glaser, Lee, and Sidney (2005) compared patient self-report and Kaiser medical records, and found that the rates of agreement were highest for African Americans and Whites, and lowest for Hispanics and Native Americans. A comparison of dental records from the VA with patient self-report of race and ethnicity, found agreement in the majority of cases for Whites (77%) and African Americans (76.4%), while there was almost no concordance for individuals identifying as Native American (4.6%; Boehmer et al., 2002). This pattern of low concordance for some racial/ethnic groups (e.g. Native American, Hispanic) and relatively high concordance for others (e.g. African American, White) has been repeated in several other studies as well (e.g. McAlpine, Beebe, Davern & Call, 2007; Waldo, 2005; West et al., 2005).

While there has been no comparison of administrative records and self-report for youth in foster care, there is one study that examined the degree to which child welfare data matched caregiver reports of youth race/ethnicity. Using data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW), a longitudinal study involving youth in the child welfare system, a comparison was made between the caregiver's description of a youth's race/ethnicity and the labels assigned by the caseworker. Results indicated that caregivers were five times more likely than caseworkers to describe their child as Native American and twice as likely to identify their child as multi-racial (Smith, Stambaugh, Morgan & Ringeisen, 2010). Smith and his

colleagues argued that the findings suggest that certain groups of young people, especially Native American and multi-racial, are likely under-represented in child welfare administrative data.

### 1.3. Rate of agreement between different agencies

There has been little investigation of the concordance of racial/ethnic categorization between different agencies or administrative data sets. One exception is a large-scale study comparing the race and ethnicity of individuals who were enrolled in both Medicare and Medicaid. In a sample of 153,241 older adults, agreement rates between the two agencies were 84% for Whites and 74% for African Americans, but only 23% for Hispanics and 5% for Asians. Different patterns emerged for each agency, with Medicaid reporting more White and African American individuals, while Medicare identified a greater percentage of Hispanic participants (Pan, Glynn, Mogun, Choodnovskiy & Avorn, 1999).

Although the literature suggests that one's racial and ethnic self-identification may be fluid, particularly during adolescence, the stability of self-categorization has not been examined for youth in foster care. Similarly, while research has examined the concordance of youth self-identification with the racial and ethnic designations assigned by others, youth in foster care have been overlooked. Finally, it is useful to look at the congruence between agencies themselves when assigning ethnic and racial labels; such an examination can offer further information on the extent to which identification by systems provides a meaningful proxy for how individuals see themselves or are more reflective of how different observers (i.e. agencies, systems) see race/ethnicity. Towards these ends, this study examined the racial and ethnic self-identification of youth in foster care over time (one-year period) and in comparison to the racial and ethnic designations made by child welfare and school systems. The following research questions were addressed:

- 1) How stable is the racial and ethnic self-identification of youth in foster care over time?
- 2) To what extent does child welfare's racial/ethnic designation for a youth match the young person's self-report?
- 3) To what extent does the school's racial/ethnic designation for a youth match the young person's self-report?
- 4) To what extent are the racial/ethnic classifications used by school and child welfare similar?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

Youth participating in the study were part of a larger evaluation of an intervention designed to enhance the self-determination and successful transition of youth preparing to exit the child welfare system. Eligible youth were between 16.5 and 18.5 years of age, resided within a targeted geography (an urban, tri-county area) and were under the guardianship of the state's child welfare agency; the majority of youth

invited to the study agreed to participate (90%). Youth who had finished their baseline and one-year term assessment, and for whom state foster care and school data collection had been completed, were selected from the larger evaluation for inclusion in the present study, resulting in a sample size of 122. Youth assented to participate and, as the legal guardian, a representative of the state's child welfare agency (e.g. the youth's case worker) provided consent. The study was reviewed and approved by the University's Institutional Review Board and the state's Child Welfare Research and Evaluation Committee.

### 2.2. Data collection and analyses

Data for the study reported herein comes from baseline and one-year term assessments conducted as part of the larger evaluation; a third one-year follow-along assessment is currently being administered and that data is not reported in these analyses. During each assessment, participants completed a survey which asked them to identify their ethnicity as Hispanic or Non-Hispanic, and to select the racial category that best described them: (a) American Indian/Alaskan Native, (b) Asian, (c) Black or African American, (d) White, (e) Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander or (f) multiracial. The survey questions mirrored the "Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity" and were consistent with how the state's child welfare and school districts structure their questions around race and ethnicity.

Information on the child welfare agency's categorization of race and ethnicity was provided by a child welfare representative who gathered the data from the agency's electronic databases (OrKids and FACIS); information on the school's categorization was provided by a school liaison to the project and was gathered from electronic educational databases (eSIS and Synergy). This information was collected at the date of the youth's baseline assessment. Data sharing agreements were established to allow for this data collection. In addition, participants (and their legal guardians and/or educational decision makers) provided their consent for this information to be collected by signing formal release of information requests.

When calculating the test–retest and inter-rater reliability of categorical data, the Kappa statistic is a useful approach as it measures the extent to which observed agreement exceeds that expected by chance alone (Cohen, 1960; Salerno, Franzblau, Armstrong, Werner & Becker, 2001; Vlera & Garrett, 2005). In the current study, the Kappa statistic was used both to evaluate the rate of agreement between youth self-report at Times 1 and 2, and the rate of inter-observer agreement (youth vs. child welfare, youth vs. school, child welfare vs. school, all at Time 1). A Kappa value equal to +1.0 implies perfect agreement between test–retest or two raters; −1.0 suggests perfect disagreement. Landis and Koch (1977) suggest that a Kappa value of less than 0 indicates poor agreement, 0.00–0.20: slight agreement, 0.21–0.40: fair agreement, 0.41–0.60: moderate agreement, 0.61–0.80: substantial agreement and 0.81–1.00: perfect or almost perfect agreement. The p value of Kappa tests whether the estimated Kappa statistic is not random or due to chance; it does not test the strength of the agreement. P values and confidence intervals are sensitive to sample size and with a large enough N, any Kappa above 0 will be statistically significant.

**Table 1**  
Stability of youth self-report (race) over time.

|                         |                                  | Youth self-report at T2        |       |                           |       |                                  |              | Total |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|---------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|--------------|-------|
|                         |                                  | American Indian/Alaskan Native | Asian | Black or African American | White | Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | Multi-racial |       |
| Youth self-report at T1 | American Indian/Alaskan native   | 6                              | 0     | 1                         | 1     | 0                                | 2            | 10    |
|                         | Asian                            | 0                              | 1     | 0                         | 0     | 0                                | 0            | 1     |
|                         | Black or African American        | 0                              | 0     | 23                        | 0     | 0                                | 4            | 27    |
|                         | White                            | 3                              | 0     | 1                         | 48    | 0                                | 3            | 55    |
|                         | Native Hawaiian/Pacific islander | 0                              | 1     | 0                         | 0     | 2                                | 0            | 3     |
|                         | Multi-racial                     | 1                              | 1     | 0                         | 4     | 1                                | 19           | 26    |
| Total                   |                                  | 10                             | 3     | 25                        | 53    | 3                                | 28           | 122   |



**Table 2**  
Stability of youth self-report (ethnicity) over time.

|                         |                     | Youth self-report at T2 |                 | Total |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-------|
|                         |                     | Not Hispanic/Latino     | Hispanic/Latino |       |
| Youth self-report at T1 | Not Hispanic/Latino | 96                      | 2               | 98    |
|                         | Hispanic/Latino     | 4                       | 20              | 24    |
| Total                   |                     | 100                     | 22              | 122   |

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Participant demographics (excluding race/ethnicity)

Information on participant demographics for sex, age, placement type and time in foster care is based on youth self-report data collected during baseline assessment. There were slightly more females (64 or 53%) participating in the study than males. On average, youth entered foster care at 10.30 years of age ( $SD = 4.60$ ) and had been in care 6.19 years ( $SD = 4.54$ ) at enrollment. The majority of youth (87 or 71.3%) resided in a non-relative foster care placement, 24.6% (30 youth) lived in a foster care placement with a relative (kinship care) and a small number of youth (5) lived in a group home. Youth ranged in age from 16.40 to 18.96 years, with the mean being 17.32 ( $SD = .65$ ).

#### 3.2. Stability of racial and ethnic self-identification among youth in foster care

At study enrollment, 8.2% of youth identified as Native American, 21.3% as multiracial, 22.1% as African American, 2.5% as Pacific Islander and 45% as White; one youth identified as Asian. Twelve months later, the overall percentage of youth identifying as Native American (8.2%) and Pacific Islander (2.5%) remained unchanged, the percentage of youth reporting to be multiracial (23%) and Asian (2.4%) increased, and the overall percentage of youth reporting to be African American (20.5%) and White (43.4%) decreased. Regarding ethnicity, the overall percentage of youth identifying as Hispanic decreased over time from 19.7% to 18%, while the percentage of youth describing themselves as non-Hispanic increased from 80.3% to 82%.

The reliability of youth self-report regarding race from Time 1 to Time 2 was found to be  $Kappa = .73$ , ( $p < .001$ ), 95% CI (.63, .82), reflecting substantial agreement. It should be noted however, that 19% of youth (23 out of 122) changed their racial self-identification over time; likewise, the Kappa statistic does not capture the variability occurring within certain subgroups. For example, youth who identified as multi-racial at baseline were one of the racial groups most likely to change their identification (26.9% or 7 out of 26, see Table 1). Another group of young people more likely to exhibit discordance from Time 1 to Time 2 were youth who identified as Native American at baseline (4 out of 10 or 40%). Among multi-racial youth changing their self-identification over time, the majority (4) switched their categorization to “White”. Regarding Native American youth shifting how they saw

themselves racially from Time 1 to Time 2, two youth changed their identification to multi-racial, with the remaining youth respectively identifying as White and African American at Time 2 (see Table 1). In contrast, only 14% of youth identifying as African American or White at baseline changed their responses one year later. Overall, almost one in five youth (19.6%) changed their racial self-identification over a 1-year period.

In regard to ethnicity, the reliability of youth self-report revealed a  $Kappa = .83$ , ( $p < .001$ ), 95% CI (.70, .95), reflecting an overall high level of agreement; only a small percentage of youth (4.9%) changed how they identified their ethnicity over time (see Table 2). However, a sizable proportion of youth (20% or 4 out of 20) identifying as Hispanic at Time 1 changed their ethnicity to Non-Hispanic one year later; in contrast, only 2% (2 out of 98) of youth identifying as Non-Hispanic changed their response over time.

#### 3.3. Concordance between youth and agency racial/ethnic identification

In approximately one-third of cases, youth and agencies disagreed on racial designations at Time 1. Specifically, the rate of concordance between youth and child welfare resulted in a  $Kappa = .45$ , ( $p < .001$ ), 95% CI (.34, .55), indicating moderate agreement, while the rate of concordance between youth and school produced a  $Kappa = .51$ , ( $p < .001$ ), 95% CI (.40, .62), also suggesting only moderate agreement. Overall, child welfare ratings were consistent with the self-reports of youth in 79 out of 122 cases (64.7%), whereas school ratings were consistent with youth self-report in 81 out of 111 cases (66%). The highest levels of agreement were for African American youth (92.6% for both agencies), followed by youth labeled as White (90.9% for child welfare, 85.5% for schools), see Tables 3 and 4. In contrast, incongruence between youth and agency reports was greatest for Native American youth; among the 10 participants who identified as Native American at Time 1, child welfare concurred with youth self-identification in only one instance (see Table 3) and school concurred with less than half (4 out of 10, see Table 4). Additionally, while a sizable number of youth identified as multiracial at Time 1, the school and child welfare agencies rarely coded youth as such; as a result, the rate of discordance between youth and agency report was high (96% for child welfare and 88.5% for school).

Regarding ethnicity, the rate of concordance between youth self-report at T1 and child welfare resulted in a  $Kappa = .57$ , ( $p < .001$ ), 95% CI (.37, .77), suggesting moderate agreement, while the level of consistency between youth at T1 and school produced a  $Kappa = .71$  ( $p < .001$ ), 95% CI (.54–.87) indicating substantial agreement. At Time 1, youth and child welfare had agreement on 109 of 122 cases (89.3%), while school's ratings were concordant with youth in 112 of 122 cases (91.8%). School and child welfare were generally consistent with youth self-report when categorizing youth who were not Hispanic (see Tables 5 and 6). However, rates of congruence were much lower among youth who identified as Hispanic at baseline (11 out of 24 or 46% when compared to child welfare ratings, 16 out of 24 or 66% when compared to school ratings).

**Table 3**  
Concordance between child welfare ratings and youth self-report at T1 (race).

|                         |                                  | Child welfare rating           |       |                           |       |                                  |              | Total |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|---------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|--------------|-------|
|                         |                                  | American Indian/Alaskan Native | Asian | Black or African American | White | Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | Multi-racial |       |
| Youth self-report at T1 | American Indian/Alaskan Native   | 1                              | 0     | 2                         | 7     | 0                                | 0            | 10    |
|                         | Asian                            | 0                              | 1     | 0                         | 0     | 0                                | 0            | 1     |
|                         | Black or African American        | 0                              | 0     | 25                        | 2     | 0                                | 0            | 27    |
|                         | White                            | 3                              | 0     | 1                         | 50    | 0                                | 1            | 55    |
|                         | Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 0                              | 0     | 1                         | 1     | 1                                | 0            | 3     |
|                         | Multi-racial                     | 2                              | 0     | 8                         | 15    | 0                                | 1            | 26    |
| Total                   |                                  | 6                              | 1     | 37                        | 75    | 1                                | 2            | 122   |

**Table 4**  
Concordance between school ratings and youth self-report at T1 (race).

|                         |                                  | School rating                  |                           |       |                                  |              | Total |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|--------------|-------|
|                         |                                  | American Indian/Alaskan Native | Black or African American | White | Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | Multi-racial |       |
| Youth self-report at T1 | American Indian/Alaskan Native   | 4                              | 1                         | 3     | 0                                | 2            | 10    |
|                         | Asian                            | 1                              | 0                         | 0     | 0                                | 0            | 1     |
|                         | Black or African American        | 0                              | 25                        | 0     | 0                                | 2            | 27    |
|                         | White                            | 4                              | 0                         | 47    | 1                                | 3            | 55    |
|                         | Native Hawaiian/Pacific islander | 0                              | 0                         | 0     | 2                                | 1            | 3     |
|                         | Multi-racial                     | 7                              | 7                         | 9     | 0                                | 3            | 26    |
| Total                   |                                  | 16                             | 33                        | 59    | 3                                | 11           | 122   |

### 3.4. Congruence between school and child welfare categorizations

When examining the rate of agreement between school and child welfare while categorizing a youth's race, a Kappa = .56 ( $p < .001$ ), 95% CI (.45, .67) was obtained, indicating only moderate agreement. For more than 1 out of 4 youth, school and child welfare agencies differed in how they coded a student's race. As highlighted in Table 7, the child welfare agency was much more likely to code a youth as White (75 or 61.5%) as compared to school (59 or 48.4%). In contrast, schools were more likely to code students as Native American (16 or 13.1% vs. 6 or 4.9%) or multiracial (11 or 9% vs. 2 or 1.6% within child welfare). Ironically, in the two instances in which the child welfare system identified a youth as multi-racial, the school district did not, resulting in zero concordance between child welfare and school when identifying multi-racial youth.

A similar Kappa (.57) was obtained for ethnicity, indicating a moderate level of agreement between child welfare and school around this variable; ( $p < .001$ ), 95% CI (.35, .79). School ratings had more youth categorized as Hispanic (18 or 15%), as compared to child welfare (11 or 9%), see Table 8.

## 4. Discussion

When surveying youth in foster care, almost one in five changed their racial self-identification over a one-year period. This reflects a higher rate of change over a shorter period of time than has been reported in the literature for adolescents in the general public. In contrast, the increased likelihood for Native American and multi-racial youth in the current study to change their racial categorization mirrors findings from earlier studies involving similarly-aged youth; the findings also suggest that a significant proportion of Hispanic youth change their ethnic categorization as well. Findings from the current study further highlight high rates of discordance between the racial and ethnic self-identification of Native American, Hispanic and multi-racial youth, and how agencies (school and child welfare) categorize them. For example, the level of discordance between self-reports of Native American youth and the racial designations made by child welfare was 90% at Time 1; youth–child welfare discordance was even higher (96.1%) for multi-racial youth. Similarly, Hispanic youth were misclassified by the child welfare system over half of the time, and by school approximately one-third of the time.

In addition to the high rates of discordance observed between youth and agencies when categorizing race and ethnicity, the level of disagreement between agencies themselves was striking. Once again, levels of discordance were highest for Native American, multi-racial and Hispanic youth, with school and child welfare agencies differing in how they categorized these youth in the majority of cases. Remarkably, there was not one instance in which school and child welfare had coded the same individual as multi-racial. Further, it is important to note that the child welfare agency was much more likely to classify youth as White (61.5%) as compared to school (48.4%) or youth themselves (45%). Likewise, a much larger percentage of youth identified as

Hispanic (19.7%), compared to school (14.8%) or child welfare (9.1%) classification.

The presence of racial disproportionality and disparity that exists for children of color in child welfare has been widely documented. The Center for Study of Social Policy (CSSP) recently completed a thorough review of the research around disparities in child welfare, carefully considering the quality and scientific merit of each study, and while there are limitations and methodological issues, CSSP's analysis of the research reveals distinct patterns for participants of color interfacing with the child welfare system (2010). In particular, the review, led by Fluke, Harden, Jenkins and Ruehrdanz, reveals that African American children are more likely to be reported to and investigated by child protective services. Additionally, African American and Hispanic children are less likely to receive in-home services. Finally, African American and Native American children are more likely to be placed in foster care, spend greater time in care, and are less likely to be re-united with bio family (Fluke et al. (2010). However, as the authors point out, a key issue surrounding the analysis of disparities in child welfare is “the nature of data collection with respect to race data” and although “practice standards are increasingly clear that race and ethnicity should be recorded based on the specific identity self-expressed by family members who come into contact with the child welfare system, the degree to which self-identification occurs may vary depending on the decision point and, in the case of reporting source, may be based on whatever implicit or explicit classification system the reporter uses” (pg. 31, 2010).

As Lucero (2007) describes, late identification or misidentification of Native American children and youth in the child welfare system has particularly negative implications as these young people may miss out on opportunities to access culturally appropriate services and foster placements as outlined by the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Additionally, she points out that while some ethnically and culturally Native American young people may not meet the federal eligibility for inclusion of their child welfare case under the ICWA definition of eligibility, a lack of court findings around ICWA eligibility does not suggest that Native American children and families should be described utilizing different racial or ethnic categorizations or be denied access to culturally responsive services.

Interpretation of research findings and, even more importantly, the ability of state agencies to monitor and address racial and ethnic disparities clearly rely on accurate collection of race and ethnicity information. Findings from this initial study suggest that this accuracy is missing and that child welfare data may actually underrepresent the number of

**Table 5**  
Concordance between child welfare ratings and youth self-report at T1 (ethnicity).

|                         |                     | Child welfare rating |                 | Total |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------|-------|
|                         |                     | Not Hispanic/Latino  | Hispanic/Latino |       |
| Youth self-report at T1 | Not Hispanic/Latino | 98                   | 0               | 98    |
|                         | Hispanic/Latino     | 13                   | 11              | 24    |
| Total                   |                     | 111                  | 11              | 122   |

**Table 6**  
Concordance between school ratings and youth self-report at T1 (ethnicity).

|                         |                     | School rating       |                 | Total |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-------|
|                         |                     | Not Hispanic/Latino | Hispanic/Latino |       |
| Youth self-report at T1 | Not Hispanic/Latino | 96                  | 2               | 98    |
|                         | Hispanic/Latino     | 8                   | 16              | 24    |
| Total                   |                     | 104                 | 18              | 122   |

youth identifying as Native American, multi-racial and Hispanic. The study's results have important implications for direct practice as well. While cultural competence has been a focus within child welfare for over a decade, often times the approach is based on an overly simplistic view that racial and ethnic groups can be understood by a set of observable characteristics and traits, which leads to stereotyping and minimization of individual differences and unique understandings. In contrast, an approach referred to as “cultural humility” may have particular usefulness given the importance, as highlighted in this study, of understanding youth as they see themselves. Cultural humility, originally developed for the training of physicians, moves away from seeing cultural groups as relatively uniform, and provides greater room for a multicultural, multilayered perspective that acknowledges how one sees one's self is based on complex intersecting group membership across a variety of social contexts, including gender, sexual orientation, class, disability and age (Ortega & Faller, 2011; Tervalon & Murry-Garcia, 1998). Greater acknowledgment of the human complexity around racial/ethnic identity also impacts the power differential, where the expectation for professionals shifts from expert (i.e., knowing everything about a particular cultural group) to that of a learner, where a youth's unique cultural identity can only be understood by learning from and engaging with youth directly. As stated poignantly by Ortega and Faller “a cultural humility perspective encourages a less deterministic, less authoritative approach to understanding cultural differences, placing more value on the child and family's own cultural expressions as they relate to their situation” (pg. 34, 2011). Further, because a cultural humility perspective is based on shared understanding, the learning process is ongoing and provides space not only for the complexity of racial/ethnic identity but also its propensity to change over time.

## 5. Limitations

The present study is one of the first to examine the stability of racial/ethnic self-identification over time among youth in foster care. As such, it provides an initial glance at an important issue but clearly requires additional investigation and attention from researchers. The current study does not examine reasons for self-report inconsistency or incongruence—it simply documents that it exists. Future studies should look at possible reasons for the divergence in self-categorization over time. One of the first areas to explore may be the racial congruence between youth and environment; i.e., the extent to which a young person's racial self-identification is similar to or different

**Table 8**  
Concordance between child welfare and school (ethnicity).

|                      |                     | School rating       |                 | Total |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-------|
|                      |                     | Not Hispanic/Latino | Hispanic/Latino |       |
| Child welfare rating | Not Hispanic/Latino | 102                 | 9               | 111   |
|                      | Hispanic/Latino     | 2                   | 9               | 11    |
| Total                |                     | 104                 | 18              | 122   |

from the people in his/her immediate context: home, school and neighborhood. Additionally, the methodology used in the current study (forced choice racial self-categorization) does not allow for exploration of variability within a group around racial identity development. As Hiltin et al. (2006) point out on page 1299 “Blacks with wildly divergent subjective racial identities will nevertheless select ‘Black’ or ‘African American’ as the monoracial category that best represents their overall racial categorization when perceived as a forced choice question.” Similarly, the term “Asian” is an overarching term that encompasses a varied group of individuals with vastly different countries of origin, cultures and histories. It should also be noted that having “multiracial” listed as one of the response choices likely lowered the percent of youth changing their self-categorization. Other studies (such as Hiltin et al., 2006; J.M. & Kao, 2007) coded change within multiple multiracial identities. For example, a participant who reported they were White and African American and subsequently White, African American and Asian would have been coded by Hiltin as a “switcher”. In contrast, the current study did not distinguish between or capture change among different multiracial categories (e.g. moving from African American and Asian to African American and White). Another potential limitation of the study is the distinction between race and ethnicity. To maintain consistency with federal standards and data collection conventions used by school and child welfare, Hispanic was labeled as ethnicity and treated as separate from race. However, everyday conventions often include Hispanic with other races, such as White and African American, and the distinction between ethnicity and race made in the study may not reflect how all Hispanic participants in the study view race.

## 6. Directions for future research

Research examining the fluidity of racial and ethnic self-identification over time has focused primarily on adolescents (present study included). It is not clear whether the change noted occurs throughout the life span or is tied to a period of development in which questioning one's identity and exploring who you are, is most typical. Research should also systematically investigate the sources of child welfare and school data around race and ethnicity. Clearly denoting instances when a professional or staff person is classifying a child's race or ethnicity based on their own perceptions or observations vs. gathering the information directly from youth or parent, will help researchers and agency leaders better understand the source of

**Table 7**  
Concordance between child welfare and school ratings (race).

|                      |                                  | School rating                  |                        |       |                                  |              | Total |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|--------------|-------|
|                      |                                  | American Indian/Alaskan Native | Black/African American | White | Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | Multi-racial |       |
| Child welfare rating | American Indian/Alaskan Native   | 3                              | 0                      | 2     | 0                                | 1            | 6     |
|                      | Asian                            | 1                              | 0                      | 0     | 0                                | 0            | 1     |
|                      | Black or African American        | 1                              | 30                     | 1     | 0                                | 5            | 37    |
|                      | d. White                         | 10                             | 3                      | 55    | 2                                | 5            | 75    |
|                      | Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 0                              | 0                      | 0     | 1                                | 0            | 1     |
|                      | Multi-racial                     | 1                              | 0                      | 1     | 0                                | 0            | 2     |
| Total                |                                  | 16                             | 33                     | 59    | 3                                | 11           | 122   |



discordance between youth self-report and agency reported information. While school and child welfare regulations stipulate that agency categorization of race and ethnicity should be based upon youth self-identification, study findings (i.e. the degree of discordance between youth and agency ratings) suggest that this may not be happening in practice. Future research should also examine the stability of agency categorizations and whether this information is regularly updated or tends to remain static over time. Additionally, given Cambell and Troyer (2007) highlighting the negative impact of misclassification on mental health, future studies should investigate whether this factor plays a role in the well-being of youth in foster care as well. Finally, the current study should be replicated with a large, nationally representative sample to provide a more expansive and in-depth look at the stability of youth self-report and concordance with agencies among racial groups with smaller sample sizes (e.g. Asian and Pacific Islander).

Findings from this study and related research reveal that racial/ethnic self-identification is not a static process for many young people of color in foster care, and suggest the need for more youth-centered and flexible approaches to identify, report, and affirm youth's evolving racial/ethnic identity. This fundamental expression of respect and support for youth development of positive racial/ethnic identity is essential for promoting youth well-being and success, as well as for promoting the capacities of our systems to successfully serve youth in our increasingly multi-racial and multi-cultural society.

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